Zero-Sustainment Aircraft for the U.S. Air Force: A Workshop Summary

Gregory Eyring, Committee on Zero-Sustainment Aircraft for the U.S. Air Force: A Workshop, Air Force Studies Board, Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences, National Research Council

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Overall Air Force weapon system sustainment (WSS) costs are growing at more than 4 percent per year, while budgets have remained essentially flat. The cost growth is due partly to aging of the aircraft fleet, and partly to the cost of supporting higher-performance aircraft and new capabilities provided by more complex and sophisticated systems, such as the latest intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. Furthermore, the expectation for the foreseeable future is that sustainment budgets are likely to decrease, so that the gap between budgets and sustainment needs will likely continue to grow wider. Most observers accept that the Air Force will have to adopt new approaches to WSS if it is going to address this problem and remain capable of carrying out its missions.

In this context, the original intent of this 3-day workshop was to focus on ways that science and technology (S&T) could help the Air Force reduce sustainment costs. However, as the workshop evolved, the discussions focused more and more on Air Force leadership, management authority, and culture as the more critical factors that need to change in order to solve sustainment problems. Many participants felt that while S&T investments could certainly help--particularly if applied in the early stages ("to the left") of the product life cycle--adopting a transformational management approach that defines the user-driven goals of the enterprise, empowers people to achieve them, and holds them accountable, down to the shop level. Several workshop participants urged Air Force leaders to start the process now, even though it will take years to percolate down through the entire organization. These sustainment concerns are not new and have been studied extensively, including recent reports from the National Research Council's Air Force Studies Board and the Air Force Scientific Advisory Board.

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